

Tim Winton: Abjection, Meaning-making and Australian Sacredness

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Tim Winton's fiction has divided critics. His writing has been characterised as nostalgic (Dixon), as too Christian (Goldsworthy), as blokey, and even misogynist (Schürholz). He has been pilloried on the blog site *Worst of Perth*, with its 'Wintoning Project,' which calls for contributions of 'Australian or Western Australian schmaltz, in the style of our most famous literary son, master dispenser of literary cheese and fake WA nostalgia Tim Winton' (online). And he has won the top Australian literary prize, The Miles Franklin Award, four times (*Shallows*, 1984; *Cloudstreet*, 1992; *Dirt Music*, 2002; and *Breath*, 2009). Winton's oeuvre spans three decades. It remains highly recognisable in its use of Australian vernacular and its sun-filled, beachy Western Australian settings; but it has also taken some dramatic, dark and probingly self-questioning turns. While critics often look for common strands in an author's oeuvre, it is revealing to consider developments and changes between individual works. How do the darker, more abject elements of Winton's imaginative visions relate to the 'wholesome' if macho Aussie surfer image, or to the writer of plenitude somehow embarrassing to critics?

Several potentially contradictory 'turns' have also been occurring in the Humanities across this period: turns to post-secularism, re-enchantment or the sacred (see Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, and Mark C. Taylor's *After God*, both 2007, for two very different approaches to the category of the sacred); and differently, new research being conducted in the jostling but related fields of constructivism, performativity, and posthumanism (see Karen Barad's influential 2007 text *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*). These approaches, the first towards post-materialist explanations of the human, and the second strongly emphasising materiality and the 'more or other than human.' Each set of approaches offers distinct speculation on the ways meaning-making can be imagined and understood.

This essay will examine Tim Winton's fiction and its critical reception in Australia in relation to the category of the sacred, as well as asking where Australian Literary Studies stands in relation to what some might consider an oxymoronic category: 'The Australian sacred.' Secondly, the essay will also question the opposition spirit/material, and its variants, sacred/secular and, differently, posthuman/human, an opposition which seems to grow, topsy-like, between these two theoretical terms. The essay will demonstrate that this duality is being questioned and broken down in some of the best theological speculation being produced today. However, unlike my colleague Robert Dixon in his declaration at the beginning of his essay on Winton—'I'm not going to do what used to be called a "close reading" of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*. I'm not going to wheel out a theoretical approach through which to interpret the text, as if the reading I could produce by that means were somehow more authoritative' (Dixon 240)—I *do* wish to engage with close reading and with theoretical concerns, not in order to be 'more authoritative,' but to create dialogue.

A small, provocative moment in Australian cultural commentary occurred in 2009 on the now defunct (but still retrievable) blog site *Still Life with Cat*, convened by Kerry Goldsworthy. In

the year Winton's novel *Breath* won the Miles Franklin award, the blog thread entitled 'Biblical world view legitimised: Australian feminist icon turns in grave,' declared:

What with first the longlist and then the shortlist, I'm not really all that surprised that the 2009 Miles Franklin Literary Award has been won by what was by far the safer choice of the two front runners, a novel in which a bitter, twisted woman called Eva (geddit? geddit?) corrupts the young hero, takes away his innocence and warps his psyche for life with her nasty dangerous bent sick non-missionary sexing-on ways. She robs our hero of Paradise, that's what she does; she pushes him into his fall from grace.

Because, as we all know, that's what women do. The Bible tells us so . . .
(Goldsworthy online)

The discussion bundles together what many of the participants on the thread see as Winton's misogyny with what some discussants monolithically called Winton's 'biblical world view,' both of equal concern to the bloggers. Much suspicion of religion, and Winton's overt Christianity, was apparent in the blog discussion. Such suspicion has a history and an ongoing context, of course. Some of the unfortunate logic of this particular debate was a drawing together of Winton's putative misogyny (Eva in *Breath*, according to the bloggers, is either a hard-done-by victim in the novel, and therefore Winton is misogynistic; and/or, contradictorily, she is depicted as an evil woman character, and this is therefore also proof of Winton's misogyny). This misogyny originates, it is suggested by the bloggers, in Winton's 'biblical world view,' and hence the sense of sarcasm and dismissiveness amongst the bloggers that he had just won the 2009 Miles Franklin award with *Breath*.

There is one quick footnote to this blog discussion: in a 2014 update on Facebook, several discussants pooled their disdainful agreement. They were not happy to see Winton once again on the Miles Franklin shortlist because they still had 'ishews' with him. In a spirit of debate I joined in, pointed out that the term 'biblical worldview' was unhelpfully monolithic, and indeed fundamentalist in its own way, and that 'religion' is a broad church, so to speak. I was informed that that was too deep for a Facebook discussion. I tend, now, to agree.

It is impossible, of course, to quantify the level and sources of anti-religious feeling in contemporary Australian culture, but senior literary and religious studies academic Jim Tulip wrote polemically and convincingly in 1996, in the Oxford journal *Literature and Theology*, comparing Australian religious culture with American:

Religion, by contrast, suffered in Australian history by seeming to be too close to an English establishment. In reaction, the surging democratic socialist leaning forces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century turned to secularism as an ideology. The cultural despisers of religion in universities and intellectual circles also forcefully articulated this ideology as a dominant style. (Tulip 239)

Many commentators would agree with this broad description of an Australian history of religion, and the reign of secularism in contemporary Australian culture. When Winton, in a 1996 interview with Andrew Taylor, was asked about religion in his work and in Australia. He replied:

. . . Australia is such a resolutely irreligious culture. Given our origins, the European origins in this country, it should be no surprise that Australians are pretty doubtful about men in uniform and authority and suspicious of the church. In America you can rely on some common religious understandings, some spiritual givens, if you like. Here the soil is pretty thin and bitter. There is no religious life without the central necessity of imagination. That historical Australian hostility to the imagination has wounded our culture, I think. It's hard writing against that flow, particularly when it's joined and reinforced by the anaesthesia of consumerism. (Andrew Taylor 375)

In his stance towards Australia as 'resolutely irreligious' Winton has many Australian literary predecessors. Predominant among them is novelist Patrick White, whose deep probing of the banality and secularity of Australian suburban existence, its failures of imagination, is carried out in tumultuous novels which excoriate Australian life and its lack of spiritual depth, particularly novels such as *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *The Solid Mandala* (1966).

Winton in this interview contentiously parallels imaginative and religious life, both under threat from what he calls 'the anaesthesia of consumerism.' This stance is amplified in Winton's own anti-consumerist activism and environmentalism, beliefs and practices he publically links to his religious faith. A literary life inflected by religious belief is indeed an unusual trajectory for a present-day Australian author, although leading poets Les Murray, Australian, North America-based Catholic intellectual Kevin Hart, Buddhist poets Robert Gray, and Judith Beveridge, are all similar to Winton in publically proclaiming their religious faith as consciously informing their imaginative practices.

In order to move the debate beyond monoliths, and to deepen the concept of religion, I want to work with a category I have been examining historically and aesthetically for a while now: 'the category of the sacred.' I'll consider the sacred under three headings: discourses of the sacred; the abject and meaning-making; and the possibility of Australian sacredness.

Discourses of the Sacred

Bound up as we all are with the strong rope of materiality and language, discourse rightly presents the first frontier for scholars of the sacred. 'Religion' is the preferred term in North American debates, but you can soon see other terminologies muscling in: belief, faith, or hope; creed, dogma or religion; 'biblical world view' indeed, and fundamentalism; mysticism, contemplation, theology, spirituality, metaphysics, the unsayable, the posthuman, the not-yet, the divine, the sacred. Then come the historical claims of the different world religious traditions, with their accompanying institutions, thrusting past the cults, sects, movements, covens, as well as the professions of individual believers. And to the right, the big players 'Materiality' and 'Secularity,' kingpins of the West for quite a while, sit biding their time, or perhaps guarding their patch, as the gangs of Re-enchantment and Post-secularity propel themselves forward. But where are they all going?

Just as the *melée* is hotting up, the rigor of academic religious studies reasserts itself—*theology*, with its multiple allegiances, methodologies and heroes; Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Indigenous Studies; and *interdisciplinarity*: literature and theology, the sociology and anthropology of religion; the regal claims of philosophy. In my work I have chosen the term 'sacred,' for better or worse, because it has a capacious embrace, can refer to many religious and secular traditions, and has a distinctive and not unproblematic usage in Australia,

as Indigenous Australia (and yes, not *all* Indigenous peoples want to be considered 'sacred') continues to work with notions of the sacred in relation to the ancestors, and to land and place.

So terminology is shifty, problematic and often it is where debates around the sacred begin and end. Let me go a little deeper and wider, connecting with some late twentieth century European debates on the sacred.

The Abject and Meaning-making

For cultural, psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva in her 1982 volume *Powers of Horror*, the place of the sacred intersects intimately with

... abjection. . . the other facet of (the) religious, moral, and ideological **codes** on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjection's purification and repression. But the return of their repressed make up our 'apocalypse,' and that is why we cannot escape the dramatic convulsions of religious crises... Who would want to be a prophet? For we have lost faith in One Master Signifier . . . (Kristeva 209)

Against those critics who want to corral Winton's works into sentimental or religiously naïve codes (read 'Christian,' 'embarrassing'), as being all about celebration of God and blokes and sunshine and surf, I will argue that his oeuvre is an extended and complex dance between states of abjection and the hope of making meaning (a preliminary definition of sacred processes). While the abject, in Kristeva's exploration of it, belongs to the unconscious, to a category beyond individual command, the category of the sacred leans both towards an understanding of such pan-individual forces, *and* towards an interrogation of what the human can do, how individuals and collectives can *make meaning* in the face of abjection and the (self-) obliteration of the human. Religion, as Kristeva argues in the quote above, is alive to such abject forces of defilement, suffering and death, and offers distinct (often clashing) narratives for the encounters with abjection.

So, the premise is that the category of the sacred embraces the inversely related fields of abjection and meaning-making. The latter is in need of fuller discussion, with particular reference to literary meaning-making. In his essay 'The Study of Literature and Theology,' for *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (2009), leading theorist David Jasper examines a core problematic for the field, that of meaning-making, and its companion, hermeneutics. Canvassing imaginative writers, philosophers, theologians and literary critics for the ways in which they approach meaning, Jasper quotes George Steiner from *Real Presences* (1989):

... any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs
... any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence. (Jasper n.p.)

Jasper writes that, in contrast, for structuralist approaches to language, '... learning from the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, the structures of texts are perceived as self-regulating, without appeals beyond themselves to order and generate patterns of meaning' (n.p.). In yet another position on the nature of meaning-making, interdisciplinary critic T.R. Wright, in his volume *Theology and Literature* (1988), writes:

Much theology . . . tends towards unity and coherence, a systematic exploration of the content of faith which attempts to impose limits on the meaning of words, while literature, as Ezra Pound insisted, is often dangerous, subversive and chaotic, an anarchic celebration of the creative possibilities of language.’ (Wright 1)

However, interdisciplinary critic Andrew Hass develops another contemporary understanding of the relationship between the sacred, literature and meaning-making. Hass brings together deconstruction and theology in a very different notion to Wright’s, using the term ‘hermeneutics,’ and moving the emphasis from fixed or final meaning, to the *processes* of interpretation:

Now, in the new light of deconstruction, hermeneutics begins to come into its own again, but no longer in the exclusive provenance of either the traditional sacred text or the traditional literary text. The ‘text,’ under the force of hermeneutics, is exploded open into spaces both cultural and existential. (Hass 295)

Hass, the editor of leading international journal *Literature and Theology*, here reminds us of the linked though divergent histories of religious and literary hermeneutics. Deconstruction is the theoretical space in which to trace the fraught drama of meaning-making in language, according to Hass. This is true too for Religious and Literary Studies thinker Kevin Hart, whose seminal interdisciplinary work *The Trespass of the Sign* explores the kinds of meaning, or more correctly the processes of ‘language’d meaning-making, perceived through Deconstruction, processes he argues are analogous to those of negative theology.

Tim Winton and Australian Sacredness

As exemplified dramatically in his 2014 novel, *Eyrie*, Winton produces a complex and challenging dialectics of abjection, meaning-making and sacredness. I would agree with Fiona Morrison’s argument in her essay “‘Bursting with voice and doubleness”: vernacular presence and visions of inclusiveness in Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*,’ that there is a pervasive desire for *plenitude* (rather than, say, abjection), informing Winton’s literary visions of community and reconciliation, and indeed there is a *transcendent* concept of fullness, especially in a novel such as *Cloudstreet*.

However, it is important to register that Winton’s oeuvre is not monolithic. There is evident, in both conscious and unconscious aspects of Winton’s writing, a subversive, restless and questioning apprehension of the sacred, as connected to both abjection and meaning-making; to plenitude too, but also to the suffering involved in the human need to make meaning. In *Eyrie* the category of the sacred embraces political, earthed understandings of how suffering, violence, failure and loss, are intimately entangled with any individual or collective vision of plenitude. Anyone who has read Winton’s short story collection, *The Turning*, or seen the film, can identify this tension in his work between suffering and a hope for meaning. Such suffering is instanced in Winton’s depiction of domestic violence and its personal, class, economic and institutional faces. In *Eyrie* we find a world of corrupt politicians, über-capitalism on a gross scale, and the wheeler-dealers who inhabit the underbelly of Western Australian society. Central character Tom Keely, a disgraced and dislodged former environmentalist, is licking his wounds. He reels and stumbles, self-medicates with pills and alcohol, and peers back bleakly at what he intermittently registers as his childhood state of grace.

The novel opens with Keely embroiled in abjection, as nauseous victim of yet another giant hangover. Seeking solace from his torturous headache, his morning-after hunger, his waves of nausea, he passes out on the cool floor of the supermarket, thinking:

Maybe this was what it was like to die a little, to feel shriven, rescued, redeemed. Having your collar pulled, your fucking beard tugged by the roots until there you were, upright and guiltless, watching your irritated savior scuff away in Third World footwear, pushing a loaded trolley. (16)

Told as farce, from floor level, this is the first fall in the novel, and there are many to come. Keely as hopeless drunk, reluctant or impotent savior, as self-pitying middle-class boy sunk to living in the shabby quarters of town, is alarming and, for many readers perhaps, totally unlikable. But in him there are also sparks of desire and empathy, and his former idealism continues to prick through the crust of his present abject self-loathing.

In fact *everyone* falls in *Eyrie*: women, men and children; drug-addled con artists, failed idealists like Keely, working class battlers like Gemma and her daughter, politicians and institutions of law and order. Falling—from some kind of grace or human goodness; from the law; from one's political or ethical ideals; and from childhood possibilities—is the recurrent metaphor of the novel. Keely's constant nightmare of falling from the tenth storey of the seedy Mirador hotel; or worse, visions of Kai's tender young body falling over the flimsy railings of the balcony, pit the narrative with evocations of human powerlessness and the failure to make or maintain ontological, or even everyday, meaning.

Tom Keely resembles many Winton male characters—Henry Warburton, Fred Scully, Quick Lamb, Sam Pickle, Luther Fox, Bruce Pike, Vic Lang—in different ways hapless men, injured, trying to perform. While a number of critics have pointed out—and often decried—the plethora of broken and abused *women* in Winton's fiction, the male characters are arguably just as misshapen and abject.

At novel's end, redemptive possibilities for Keely have been sketched. But only sketched. This is not a full-blown redemptive tale; more a narrative map for what still needs to be done, or understood. Keely's attempts to 'save' Gemma, Kai and himself have been piecemeal, and at times farcical. What can someone with nothing 'inside' (or outside) do for others? What meaning can be *made* when all that's come before is shredded, providing no footing. Some things, it is suggested. While falling is the predominant trope of the novel, the title is 'Eyrie,' and the flight of big, beautiful, fragile birds is a key image too.

Assailants come in all sizes in the novel, as do victims. The encounter between Clappy the short thug, and abject, reeling Keely brings the novel towards its end, but not until one final fall. It would be unfair to reveal the novel's ending, but it's enough to say that Keely, in pursuit of the thug, falls, sprawling yet again on the pavement:

The veiled faces retracted uncertainly and Keely understood. He'd fallen. He saw the tower beyond and the tiny figure of the boy safe on the balcony. . . The boy's face a flash—or was that a gull? (424)

Readers will judge whether this is a scene of redemption or of farcical abjection—or both. No-one is superman or superwoman in *Eyrie*; not father Nev of blessed memory; not the institutions of police and law, not social workers; certainly not Keely the ineffectual. But what we do

witness in Keely is the persistence of human desire to redeem that which is eminently unsavable, to make meaning when all meaning seems self-imploding: to make meaning in relationship to his childhood of goodness personified imperfectly in his father; in relation to the endangered environment and its creatures; to Gemma and, most urgently, for Kai, the child who has been monstered and deprived of goodness. Keely has been read by critics as an unlikable, ineffectual and self-deluded idealist, caught in the traps of nostalgia, a middle class mummy's boy gone wrong. But around him circles a vision of unquenchable human longing—flickering, intermittent—to live up to ethical, political, unself-interested meaning, no matter how unrealisable, how pitifully fallen.

As the passersby lean over the fallen Keely, at novel's end, one inquires:

Sir, there is bleeding. Are you well?

Yes, he said with all the clarity left in him. Thank you. I am well. (424)

Keely lies—graceless, fallen, sprawled—but he is grateful, and 'well.' For readers seeking resolution from the narrative's many strands, or from Keely's characterisation—perhaps in his movement from self-pity and self-interest, to a desire for justice, even redemption, as fragmentary as that might be—the ending will perplex. This is not a novel offering resolution, *Eyrie* is a lot darker, more tangled and unpromising than that. But it has impact in its questioning, asking the reader relentlessly, in the figure of Tom Keely: how might we respond to human fallenness in the state and in oneself, in family, and in those beyond the tight circle of family? The novel operates on entangled ethical, political and sacred levels, exposing the dystopia of human greed and self-congratulation, but imagining something more than what is. I would argue that in Winton's oeuvre, intimations of sacred meaning-making are not part of the processes of *the Master Signifier* noted by Kristeva. They are about ways to acknowledge the abject, broken, fallen conditions from which all human meaning-making arises. Think of *The Riders*, of *Dirt Music*, *Breath*, and *The Turning*, all asking questions about the making of meaning, questions that arise out of human brokenness and abjection, Yeats's 'foul rag and bone shop of the heart' (Yeats 89).

As Kristeva reminded us, in her own prophetic terms: Who today would want to be a prophet? For we have lost faith in One Master Signifier . . . (209). Indeed we have, and there is much understandable indignation when anyone tries to reinstate the One narrative. Any attempt to install, for example, a category such as 'the Indigenous sacred' as an overriding category in Australia is rightly met with cries of essentialism and tokenism. To call on Christianity, complex and multi-stranded as it is, to stand for Australia's historical religion, is a direction not many would welcome. But if contemporary Australia is to be truly secular, in the full sense of this word as tolerant, open, accepting of difference, seeking and respecting the other's meaning, their traditions of meaning-making, it must listen to the sacred claims of its Indigenous, Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist and secular citizens, not for answers, but to recognise the questions and the processes. I have been arguing that the abject is one site in which such questions arise, For post-religious theologian Mark C. Taylor the sacred brings 'The new [which] emerges far from equilibrium . . . at the edge of chaos in a surprising moment of creative disruption that can be endlessly productive' (xvii); one possible description of the abject and its powers.

For critic and poet Kevin Hart, writing in his 2010 essay 'Reading Theologically' from the collection *Intersections in Christianity and Critical Theory*, there is a palpable awareness of living in the multiplicity and materiality of the world, a multiplicity not understood defensively

as a one-eyed religious person—but phenomenologically, in open, creative and constitutive ways, as he examines what it means to be religious *and* to be in the world, the sacred and the secular bound together in daily orientation towards what he calls the sublime's 'hidden or neglected horizons.' Hart sees such openness as necessary for living religiously, as well as for reading and writing.

This stance comes close to the parallel drawn by Winton quoted above, when he says: 'There is no religious life without the central necessity of imagination.' I think of Winton's image of the surfers in *Breath*, the temporal and bodily entwined with 'the sublime's 'hidden or neglected horizons.' For Pikelet, the central character in *Breath*, there were: 'these blokes dancing themselves across the bay with smiles on their faces and sun in their hair...later I understood what seized my imagination that day. How strange it was to see men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared' (Winton 23). This is Pikelet's making of meaning in the sublime materiality of nature, *and* with intimations of the more than human; a process which is conscious and unconscious, a making of meaning through thought and affect.

One final provocation: perhaps contemporary Australia—Indigenous, multicultural, heir in a rebellious and anti-authoritarian mode to European, institutional dogmas and religions, and to Asian traditions—is a lot more religious *and* secular than it realises; secular in the sense of not being exclusively allied with or against any particular religion, open to the beliefs of the other. For sociologist Jürgen Habermas, in his 2006 essay 'Religion in the Public Sphere,' much depends '... on whether secular and religious citizens, each from their own respective angle, are prepared to embark on an interpretation of the relationship of faith and knowledge that first enables them to behave in a self-reflexive manner toward each other in the political public sphere' (20).

In a different discourse, but intimately related to Habermas's notion of self-reflexivity, theological scholarship tells us that the term 'turning' is connected to the Greek word 'metanoia,' meaning to change, turn around, repent. There is actually quite a bit that Australia as a nation—as coloniser, refuser of refugees, polluter of land, as deaf or violently reactive to the other's beliefs—needs to repent of, to be sorry about, to change. Religious and secular openness, a turning around and towards the other, are central aspects of the future for any contemporary Australian Sacredness.

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